

A world of silence

Two children, sitting on a rocky boulder which was as timeless as the sky above them. It was their favourite spot, and their favourite time of the day – a golden afternoon of summer idleness. Monkeys were leaping on the branches of the trees around them, chattering and staring at them with wizened, comical faces. Butterflies flitted among the shrubs. Just down the road, the bells of Kamakhya pealed, carrying the music that had accompanied them through their childhood. She was a little older – a slender girl with her straight hair tied in a ribbon, wearing a pink frock buffeted by the wind, her arms and legs tanned nut brown by the sun. Her pretty, oval face was innocent, trusting and always wore an amiable expression. She was plucking tiny white flowers as she sat, bent low over the grass. The boy, as brown as she was, could not be still for a moment. He hopped around, as nimble as a goat, picking up little pebbles and flinging them far down the hill. Then he sat by his sister, linking her arm companionably through his.

They stared at the scene before them. It never failed to take their breath away, this city spread below them in an endless, sprawling vista, tiny matchbox houses and streets like ribbons, a magical kingdom shimmering in the light. And then the broad, tranquil arc of the Brahmaputra sweeping by, the column, tiny as a needle, of the Urvashi island, and the tiny ferry boats chugging to and fro. Now and then, a train, like a tiny earthworm, passing through, and if they were lucky, a droning helicopter flying over the city.

The little boy could not sit still much longer. He stood up, cupped his palms around his mouth, and shouted to the wind. He screamed out his name in that void, and the wind carried it off, like it always did. He screamed louder and louder and then turned to his sister, grinning, nudging her. She too cupped her hands, opened her mouth. He watched her, anxious, waiting. With a sinking heart he saw the muscles of her neck stand out, rigid cords under the skin. But no sound came out of her mouth. She looked at him, helpless, dejected. He solemnly picked up her flowers and took her arm. It was time to go home.

This is the poignant, heart warming and truly inspirational story of that little girl – Adity Das, born deaf and mute, and of the family who have fought bravely against great odds to give her a normal life. It is the story of a devoted couple moving heaven and earth so that their beloved first born Adity, or Sumi, would never feel the pain of living in a world of complete, profound silence, never being able to mouth the words to express herself.

Sumi was born on a cold November day in 1989. “From the very beginning, she gave no trouble at all,” recounts mother Jina Das. “She never cried much and was a healthy baby. She sat up, began to crawl – all the normal things children do. But at twelve months, she still hadn’t started talking, calling out *Baba* or *Ma*.”

“There was another thing that worried us,” broke in her father, Naren Chandra Das. “Even if something fell right near her, she did not cry out in alarm. She did not look at me when I clapped my hands. Something was wrong and we had to find out fast. We took her to the late Dr N K Agarwalla, an ENT specialist. He saw that she was not responding to the bell he rang close to her. So he told me to get a BERA test done at the Gauhati Medical College and Hospital.” BERA (Brain evoked response audiometry) is an electro – physiological test procedure which studies the electrical potential generated at the various levels of the auditory system, starting from the cochlea to the cortex. So, one day, as little Sumi lay on a hospital cot, sucking her thumb, electrodes were fixed over her scalp and stimulus transmitted to her ears with a transducer. The diagnosis was chilling. Sumi had Bilateral Profound SNHC, with severe hearing and speech impediment. “But they never really told me what that meant,” says Das, remembering the heartbreak of those early years. “I don’t know why. May be they did not want me to lose hope. The doctors told me to take her to a speech therapist. Very early on, my wife and I decided that we would take her to the best specialists. We are a working couple. We are both employees of the Assam Police Radio Organisation posted at Bhuvanewari on the Nilachal Hills. We live in the government quarters there and often cut corners to manage our home. But where Sumi was concerned, no expense was too great. I took my girl to Dr N N Dutta of Downtown hospital. He in turn sent me to speech therapist Dolly Dutta Senapati. She told me to get her a hearing aid. But that was of no help at all. We were unable to help her hear anything. By now, we knew our daughter’s problem was far worse than we had imagined.”

“In the beginning, I could not handle the guilt,” says mother Jina. “I had been having medicines for high blood pressure during the pregnancy. Did that cause our daughter to be born a deaf-mute? Was God punishing us for something? Or was it the forceps used during the delivery that injured her delicate head? Such things have been known to happen. I have never stopped wondering.”

But Naren Chandra Das was made of sterner stuff. He did not think much of those who bemoaned fate or wallowed in self pity. This tough man with a quick smile and no-nonsense air about him put all his energy, resourcefulness and dogged determination into one goal – to give his beloved little daughter a fighting chance in life. In an India where baby girls are snuffed out in the womb and young women killed for honour, this father’s unconditional love and brave struggle to give his daughter a life worth living is truly inspiring.

For two years, Das drove his car down the Nilachal hill come rain or shine, with little Sumi beside him, on their way to Senapati’s clinic. The speech therapist involved him too, and he carried out the therapy sessions at home, standing before a mirror with Sumi, slowly and deliberately pronouncing syllables, words so that she could lip read. The little girl always looked intently, smiling, nodding. She was cheerful, outgoing, eager to befriend strangers, neat and tidy in the way she arranged her toys. When she was three and a half, Senapati gently suggested: “It’s time Sumi went to school.”

“Kalpana Bezbarua *Baideu*’s Sahayika was her first school,” says Das. “She was so happy, running around the playground, being with other children, looking at picture charts. But she was not mentally retarded. So *Baideu* told me to transfer her to a

regular school. This time, I enrolled her at Sister Nivedita's school. The authorities there were doubtful if Sumi could cope. I pleaded with them. Just let her sit in class. She is quick to learn. You will have no problems at all. And Sumi proved me right. She was getting such good grades, without hearing the teachers speak, or ask questions. My girl would never let me down."

By this time there was an addition in the family – Sumi's baby brother, whom she adored with all her heart. Thankfully, Shivraj is perfectly normal.

Sumi's personality was now flowering. She had definite likes and dislikes. She wanted her Ma and Baba to be always well-groomed and wear nice clothes. She hated to be late for school and gave a resounding slap to her kid brother if he doodled on his school copy instead of studying. Not a thing was allowed to be out of place in that household. And every single day, Sumi would pray to Goddess Bhuvaneshwari, with flowers, joss sticks and incense.

For a couple of years, after being promoted to the next class, Naren Ch. Das enrolled her in Cambridge Public School and Maharishi Vidya Mandir, Kalipur. From winning prizes in athletics, fine arts, and a certificate of participation in both the opening and closing ceremonies of the National Games held at Guwahati in 2009, Sumi was blazing her own trail. In 2008, she matriculated through the National Institute of Open Schooling, with letter marks in painting. Now nothing could stop her. Das enrolled her in CINCAD (Centre for Information and Career Development) in the arts course. Very early on, her quick-witted father realised that Sumi would be able to get a job more easily if she was trained in Computer Science. So when Sumi completed her HS, he made sure she did a BCA programme at the Krishna Kanta Handique Open University at Cotton College. She is at her second semester there at present.

When I meet this brave family, Naren Chandra Das shows me Sumi's certificates and medals, lovingly preserved over the years. Among them is a vital document that may be the key to Sumi's future. It is a government ID, a Disability Card issued by the Department of Social Welfare, Government of Assam in 2009. She is training in DTP at the Vocational Rehab Centre at Basistha, under the Government of India's Ministry of Labour and Employment. Das also drives Sumi to another computer training centre under a Government of India Community Development through Polytechnic scheme.

"We are hoping she will get a job soon," he says. "It is no use just sitting back and expecting someone will help your disabled child. You have to educate and train him/her in some vocation. You have to get the papers that will help them avail of government schemes and job opportunities. There are so many parents out there who lose heart and don't know what to do. I feel proud to look back on all these years when my wife and I, with our modest means and God's blessings, tried to do our best for our little girl."

Overcome by emotion, Das bows his head and busies himself with arranging her papers in the file. Sumi looks at him, and at me. She is as pretty as a picture in a pale blue *salwar kameez* with net sleeves and satin flowers. Her face, with its clear skin and warm eyes, looks trustingly at me. Her silent world shuts out all harsh words, the cacophony of madly honking cars, the grating sound of machinery. It is a still, peaceful world within her, and maybe, just maybe, this silence is a blessing.

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